

A HISTORY OF HANDBELLS AT FIRST-ST. ANDREW'S UNITED CHURCH

The music of handbells has enriched the ministry of music at First-St. Andrew's United Church since 1970. The unique sound and appearance of the 61 bronze bells has been an important addition to the life and worship of the church, both for those who hear them and those who play them. The bells were cast in the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in London, England, an old and venerable company whose history of bell making dates to 1420. A special bequest to the music programme allowed Barrie Cabena, the Director of Music in 1970, to order the first three octaves (36 bells) and travel to London to take delivery of the bells personally.

The first bell choir was directed by Merrie Young. In 1973, Barbara Plante began directing the group, named the Ladies' Handbell Choir, and has continued directing the group to the present. During the 1970's, Helen Heller directed a youth handbell group for several years. After a hiatus of several years, Barbara Plante directed a youth handbell choir. In 1985, Helen Inch began a second adult group of men and women, called the Mixed Peal-ers, which continued until 1998. The youth handbell choir had stopped several years earlier. In the early 1990's, the Ladies' Handbell Choir changed their name to Laudamus Bells.

During the 1970's and 1980's, the number of handbells gradually increased from the original 36 bells to the present 5-octave set of 61 bells. Handbells do not require a great deal of maintenance, but they do occasionally need repair or adjustment. Bob Plante has maintained the handbell set at a high level of excellence throughout the years.



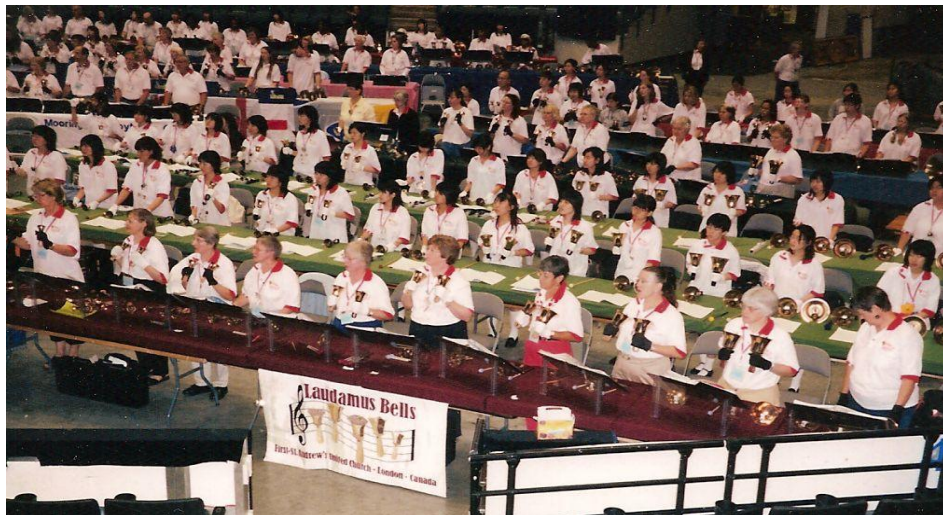
Ladies' Handbell Choir early 1980's

Although membership in each of the handbell choirs changed yearly, the

Laudamus Bells still has one of the original ringers from the Ladies' Handbell Choir, Bev Lindsay, a most devoted and accomplished ringer. Most of the ringers are members of the congregation, but each group has also had ringers who were members of other churches or had no church affiliation. These ringers have always joined enthusiastically in any church activities involving the bell choir(s) and have willingly played in church services. Laudamus Bells usually plays once a month in the Sunday service.

Over the years, all of the handbell choirs have made significant contributions to the life of First-St. Andrew's and to the community, but Laudamus Bells, now in its 36th year, has been the most active. The group has played for weddings, nursing homes, numerous groups and organizations including The Canadian Club, other churches in London and beyond, and once for Sir Edmund Hilary. Every two years, the group takes part in the 3-day Ontario Guild of English Handbell Ringers Festival.

At FSA, as well as taking part in hundreds of Sunday services and special services over the years, Laudamus Bells has played numerous concerts. For many years, the group played a 30-minute concert to open the Holly Bazaar and a 30-minute Advent Noon Hour concert. The group has also provided congregational lunches and dinners for Middlesex Presbytery and visiting musical groups. In return, the congregation has supported the group wholeheartedly when needed. When the group decided to attend the International Handbell Symposium in Birmingham, England in 2000, congregational support for fundraising was overwhelming. The group had previously attended an International Handbell Symposium in Vancouver in 1986 and were invited to play at Expo while there. In 2004, the group helped organize the International Handbell Symposium in Toronto which attracted over 600 ringers from all over the world. Our director, Barbara Plante, was one of the Massed Conductors, who rehearsed and conducted all 600 ringers on one of the pieces in the final concert at the Air Canada Centre.



Toronto International Handbell Symposium 2004

By far, the most significant achievement of the handbell choir at FSA was organizing Ontario's first Handbell Festival and developing the Ontario Guild of English Handbell Ringers (OGEHR), both in 1985. Similar guilds have since been organized in

other provinces (Alberta's guild began in 1983). These guilds interact with the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers (AGEHR), Handbells of Great Britain (HGB), and similar organizations in Japan, Australia, and Korea. The Ontario Guild is most active in promoting handbell ringing in Ontario, organizing provincial handbell events, and encouraging choirs to take part in international events. Over the years, many Laudamus ringers have served on its executive.

Laudamus Bells is an active and caring group of ringers with close friendships who enthusiastically welcome new members. Handbell ringing is a lovely way to make music and a sound that is heavenly and makes a beautiful addition to any service of worship. It is the ultimate in teamwork with all ringers having equal importance. Handbell music will ring out at First-St. Andrew's for many years to come.



Laudamus Bells 2006



Celebrating 175 Years in 2007

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